

A Library Website Redesign in the Time of COVID

A Chronological Case Study

Erin Rushton and Bern Mulligan

He found a glimmer of hope in the ruins of disaster
Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

ABSTRACT

In November 2019, Binghamton University Libraries initiated a website redesign project. Our goal was to create a user-centered, data-informed website with refreshed content and upgraded functionality. Originally, our redesign plan included in-person card-sorting activities, focus groups, and usability studies, but when the Libraries went remote in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to quickly reassess and adapt our processes and workflows. In this article, we will discuss how we completed this significant project remotely by relying on effective project management, communication, teamwork, and flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

Website redesign projects can be daunting, even during normal circumstances. This article will outline how we accomplished a website redesign project in a reasonable timeframe during the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Binghamton University is part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system. Founded in 1946, it has an enrollment of about 18,000 graduate and undergraduate students. Binghamton University Libraries are an important part of the University, serving as the center of the University's intellectual community. Our website is the Libraries' most important tool for "scaling up" services to our users. It is as important as the physical library and became even more so with the digital demands imposed by COVID, particularly the importance of access to streaming video during the pandemic.

A truism in website redesign is that your current website is never more popular than when you take it down. However, our redesigned website was successfully launched to general approbation and is considered a functional and cosmetic improvement over the old website. We were pleasantly surprised how little negative feedback we received. People just started using it, which may be the highest compliment paid to a design team.

As we will highlight throughout the article, we believe that the success of this project was the result of the following:

- A dedicated/functional web team,
- The ability to meet frequently and on a moment's notice,
- The ability to focus almost exclusively on the project; and
- Effective project management.

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PREMISE FOR THE REDESIGN

The last time the Libraries had fully redesigned the website was in 2013. That project was significant because we had migrated from a locally hosted site to the University's web content management system, OmniUpdate. Highlights of the 2013 redesign included a fresh look and feel with Binghamton University colors, updated site architecture and navigation, and expanded search options from the home page.

Up until 2013, we had typically redesigned our website on a five-year cycle. As such, we began discussing the possibility of another redesign in mid-2018. We also thought it was an opportune time to redesign the website because the Libraries had a new dean, we were offering new services and initiatives, and we had become more mindful of accessibility issues and responsive design.

THE WEB TEAM

The Libraries' web team is the group that leads website redesign projects and maintains the website. The team generally meets as needed between redesign projects. In anticipation of the planned 2019–2020 redesign, however, we began scheduling more regular meetings. Our preferred meeting times were Friday mornings. One of the prerequisites for these meetings was to take turns bringing bagels and juice. We quickly got to know what kind of bagel each of us preferred.

In November 2019, the team consisted of Ben Coury, Bern Mulligan, Erin Rushton (chair), and Dave Vose. Except for Ben, the other members of the web team had participated in several past library website redesigns. Ben had recently been hired as the Libraries' digital web designer. He brought high-end programming skills to the team and expertise and knowledge about user experience and accessibility which were integral to the success of the project.

It was an advantage to have a small, dedicated, and agile team that collaborated and communicated well. This positive chemistry or esprit de corps among members allowed us to debate any controversial issues professionally, not personally. We internalized the team's mission and worked single-mindedly toward its successful completion.

Binghamton University is a Google campus, which meant we had access to the full suite of Google Apps (e.g., Gmail, Google Calendar, Google Drive, Google Groups, etc.). At the beginning of the redesign, we had already begun to use Google to create, share, and archive our committee documents.

PROJECT TIMELINE

This is the timeline for the project, which took ten months to complete. It occurred basically in two phases: before COVID and after COVID. Much of the work that occurred before COVID was completed in person. All of what occurred after COVID was done virtually: via email, phone, and, as was the case with most organizations during the pandemic, via Zoom.

- November 2019: planning phase
- December 2019–March 11, 2020: in-person meetings with library constituent groups
- March 12, 2020: meeting with student advisory group
- **March 17, 2020: COVID shutdown**
- April 15, 2020: meeting with Communications and Marketing

- April–June 2020: website architecture and content review
- July 2020: creating templates, migrating content, and designing the home page
- August 2020: final meetings and details
- **August 19, 2020: successful launch of the new website**

When planning a website redesign project, it is understood that there will be a lot of meetings. As the pace of the project accelerates and as the deadline approaches, so does the frequency of meetings. During the ten months of this project, we met 64 times: 16 in-person meetings from November 2012 to March 12, 2020; 25 virtual meetings from March 17 to the end of June; and 23 virtual meetings in July and August.

During July and August until launch, the other aspects of our jobs took a back seat to the project; it's pretty much all we worked on. We sometimes met twice a day, and that's not counting the incidental phone calls between individual members for questions about sticking points in the process.

November 2019: Planning Phase

The Libraries' User Interface Steering Committee (UISC) has oversight for the various public library interfaces, including the website. The committee consists of the web team members and representatives from different departments in the Libraries, including Public Services, Technical Services, and Special Collections. The UISC helped us establish the goals and objectives for the redesign project, gave us feedback about ideas during the redesign process, and monitored our ongoing progress.

There were four goals that became apparent almost immediately. Over the years, many website development requests had been postponed, so our first goal was to accommodate these improvements and enhancements. And since University Communications and Marketing, the unit on campus responsible for the entire University web domain, had updated templates since our last redesign, our second goal was to utilize the new templates. Our third goal was to create a user-centered, data-informed website. Finally, our fourth goal was to address accessibility issues on the website and make it easier for users to navigate.

December 2019–March 11, 2020: In-Person Meetings with Library Constituent Groups

Once the goals had been established, we began scheduling meetings with a variety of library constituent groups. These included Preservation, Reader Services, Special Collections, and Dean's Council. It was important for us to get input from these groups because we wanted everyone to feel represented by the project since the website is the gateway for many of our services and resources. We also wanted the redesign process to be transparent so that everyone knew what was happening. At each meeting, we discussed how the website was working for their area and what improvements they wanted to see. We also provided a snapshot of the website for each area which showed current usage statistics (see fig. 1).

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES	Current URL	Recommendation	Migrating	Link to Google Doc	Completed	Last updated	Pageviews
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES	s/special-collections/index.html	Will be redesigned				9/7/2018	1167
Overview	collections/about/overview.html	Keep - review content	Yes	Overview page		9/6/2016	387
Locations and Hours	-collections/about/location.html	Delete - combine with other pages? Update - migrate page as is.	Yes			11/17/2016	293
Connect to Us	-collections/about/connect.html	Delete - do we need? BRB wants to know, where would you suggest putting social media links? Update - will rename. Will include a link to News and Exhibits. BRB suggests deleting this page and having icon for SC blog added to the footer with the Twitter, Pintrest and Facebook icons	Yes (BRB thinks NO)			10/15/2018	324
Binghamton University & Faculty Archives	esearchandcollections/bua.html	Delete - move description to a "collecting areas page". Update - migrate page with edits.	Yes	Archives	Yes	9/2/2019	593
Edwin A. Link and Marion Clayton Link Collections	chandcollections/linkabout.html		Yes		Yes	11/17/16	391
Local History Resources	andcollections/localhistory.html	Delete - move description to a "collecting areas page"		Local History		2/22/2018	438

Figure 1. Screenshot of a website inventory spreadsheet for Special Collections.

March 12, 2020: Meeting with Student Advisory Group

We met with the Student Library Advisory Committee (SLAC) on March 12. This group offered open, two-way communication between the Libraries and the student population and provided a mechanism for the Libraries to solicit feedback on specific issues as needed. As an incentive for students attending this meeting, we provided free pizza and snacks. At this meeting, we asked the students a variety of questions, including why they used the website and what they liked and disliked about it.

Some of the answers we received were surprising to us. For one thing, few of the students began their research from our website. While they had used the website, they were not particularly familiar with most of its features. A second consensus of the group was that if they wanted to know something about the Libraries (e.g., our hours), they just Googled it. Finally, although our Ask a Librarian service was linked from several places on the website, none of the students in the group had ever noticed it and were unaware of the service. These revelations further informed what we wanted to address in the redesign.

March 17, 2020: COVID Shutdown

On March 17, the University abruptly closed in-person services due to the growing pandemic. For a few weeks after the shutdown, the priority for all University employees was transitioning to remote work and providing virtual services.

Once we felt ready to resume the project, we had to reassess how we would continue it remotely. There were two significant challenges: how to continue our committee work as a distributed team and how to continue gathering user feedback given that no one was physically on campus. We discovered that transitioning into a distributed team worked well for the project. We no longer had to reserve meeting spaces and set up laptops and projectors. Instead, we could quickly organize Zoom meetings, sometimes on the fly, when we had something we wanted to discuss. And all our committee files were already on Google Drive. As a result, we were better able to focus almost exclusively on the project and were less impacted by the distractions that often occur in the office environment.

Unfortunately, we were unable to conduct any of the focus groups with teaching faculty or the “guerrilla” usability testing with students that we had planned. However, we were glad to have had the in-person meetings with some of our constituents before the work-from-home phase because we had established a good foundation of what we needed to accomplish in the redesign.

April 15, 2020: Meeting with Communications and Marketing

One of the first groups we met with virtually was University Communications and Marketing (C&M). As mentioned above, this is the unit on campus that is responsible for OmniUpdate, the University’s website platform. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss our plans and timeline and to clarify the role of C&M in the project. Although we now had our own web designer in Ben, we knew that C&M had oversight over the entire University web presence and would have to decide whether our redesign fit in with the rest of the domain in terms of its appearance and accessibility.

April-June 2020: Website Architecture and Content Review

The next significant part of the project was reviewing our current pages. During preliminary planning the year before, we had a student list all pages of the Libraries’ website in a Google spreadsheet which also included Google Analytics from the three previous years. We literally spent hours poring over this document (see fig. 2). It helped us identify which pages would migrate mostly as is, which pages would need additional review, which pages would be converted to LibGuides and vice versa, and which pages would be deleted.

Page	URL	Action	Status	Location in Megamenu	Last updated	Pageviews	Unique Pageviews
A-Z Resource List	ton.edu/az.php	Webteam	Update and migrate	Search & Find		44716	40134
Reservations	ons/index.html	Services	Update and migrate	Services	5/22/2019	21642	17816
Hours	urs/index.html	Webteam	Update and migrate	About	1/10/2020	11570	10592
Bartle Library	ons/bartle.html	Locations	Update and migrate	Locations & Collections	6/26/2019	8180	6669
UDC Library - Information Commons	idc-library.html	Locations	Update and migrate	Locations & Collections	7/8/2019	6156	5407
Library Floor Maps	aps/index.html	Locations	Update and migrate	ns & Collections, About	1/2/2019	6161	4243
How To Do Library Research	libraryresearch	Research help	LibGuide	Research Help	10/24/2019	4437	3864
Refworks	fworks_landing	Deleted	Deleted		11/11/2019	3873	3707
Staff Directory by Department	s-directory.html	Webteam	Update and Migrate	About	1/23/2020	4293	3656
Student Jobs Available in the Libraries	ons/index.html	Admin	Update and Migrate		1/27/2020	4671	3047
Printing and Scanning in the Libraries	ices/print.html	Reader Services	Update and Migrate	Services	1/10/2020	3363	3018
Course Reserves	https://libraryguides.binghamton.edu/reserves	Reader Services	Migrate from LibGuides	Search & Find, Services	1/23/2020	2712	2520
Student Employment in the Libraries	lent/index.html	Admin	Update and migrate		7/18/2017	2986	2242
Science Library	s/science.html	Locations	Update and migrate	Locations & Collections	7/15/2019	2526	2121
Reader Services and Resource Sharing	der/index.html	Reader Services	Update and migrate	Services	6/26/2019	2328	2001
Ask a Librarian	rian/index.html	Research help	Updated and migrate	Research Help, Services	3/10/2017	2330	1980

Figure 2. Screenshot of a spreadsheet listing all library web pages.

Originally, we had planned to do a physical card sorting like we had done in past redesigns. We had even created the cards and had scheduled an all-day card-sorting event, complete with pizza. But COVID changed all that. Since we were meeting virtually, we had to think of another way to accomplish this. A breakthrough occurred when Ben introduced Trello, an online collaboration and project management tool that allowed us to work together on the new website's architecture in real time via Zoom (see fig. 3).

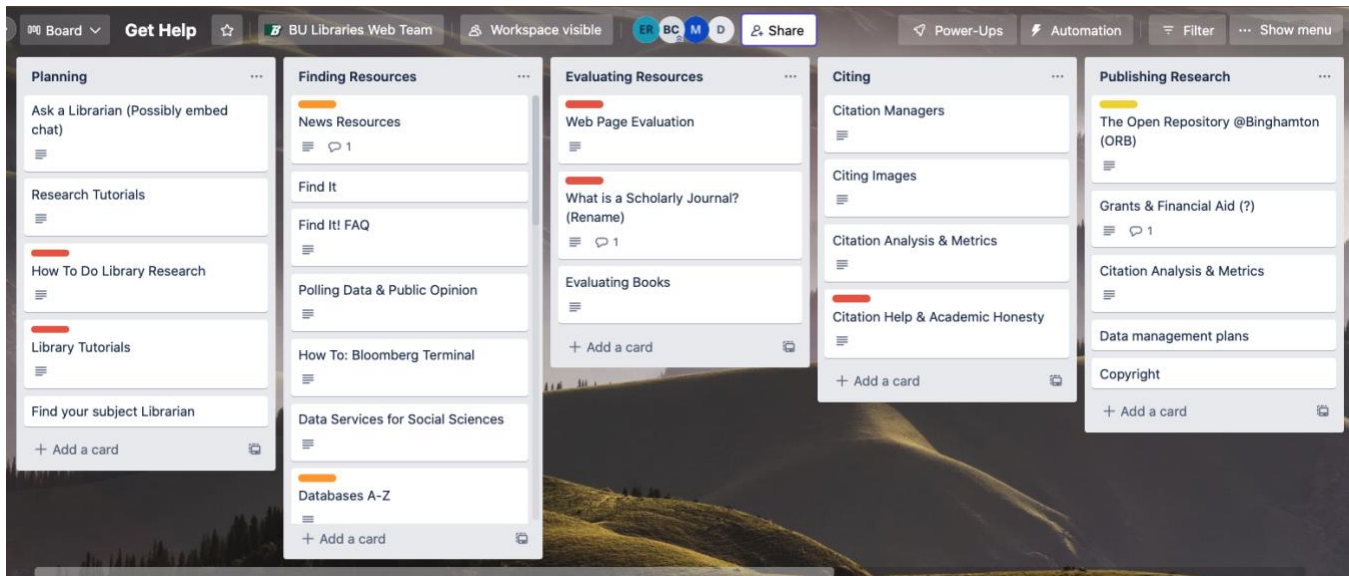


Figure 3. Screenshot of a Trello board.

We recreated the six existing main navigation categories and created “cards” for each web page. Trello made it easy to move these virtual cards around into the different categories. We had received feedback that six categories were perhaps too many for users to choose from. We spent a number of meetings in May discussing/debating what the new navigation categories should be and where pages fit under them. We decided to fold the Locations & Collections and Special Collections sections into About, and Search & Find into Research, because we felt these changes made more logical and functional sense. We added a top-level link to My Account because this was also something that users had suggested should be more prominent.

Another aspect of the Libraries’ website redesign project was the content of LibGuides. Initially, they were meant to be subject guides, but over the years some of our web pages were converted into LibGuides. As part of the redesign, we worked closely with the Collections and Instruction department to make decisions about where content should be located. Most LibGuides are now subject or research guides while descriptions of Libraries’ services are web pages.

July 2020: Creating Templates, Migrating Content, and Designing the Home Page

By the end of June, we had accomplished the following:

- Met with available constituencies,
- Identified what content we needed to migrate,
- Identified what content needed to be created; and
- Had a new website architecture.

At this point, we felt we needed to focus on the actual migration of content and the design of the home page. On July 2, we met virtually with Collections and Instruction to discuss how the search box on the home page would look and function. It was no mean feat coming to consensus on this. We were on a tight schedule, but we wanted to be sure that we heard everyone's ideas. Taking all feedback into consideration, Ben then had the ultimate challenge of coding and designing a functioning search box.

For the last three weeks of July, we met daily, and sometimes twice a day, as we began the daunting process of migrating all the lower-level pages. We were definitely feeling the pressure to complete the project on time.

Since we were using the new University templates, designing the lower-level pages was relatively straightforward. Ben had customized the template and provided us with a migration guide. The guide included instructions on how to create and format new pages. This allowed the other members of the web team to migrate content while he focused on the more complicated aspects of the project. All migrated content was reviewed to ensure that it was current. For some pages, this required input from several departments. To facilitate the updating, we copied the content of every page we were migrating into a Google Doc to allow for collaborative editing. Once the content was updated, it would be copied and pasted into the new template. The screenshot in figure 4 represents the redesign for most of the lower-level pages.

The screenshot displays the Binghamton University Libraries website. The header includes the university name and 'Libraries' with a search icon. A navigation bar contains links for 'About', 'Services', 'Research', 'My Account', and 'Giving'. Below the header is a banner image of three people in a library setting with the text 'SERVICES FOR FACULTY'. The main content area includes a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Libraries > Services > Services for Faculty'. The text describes library resources like electronic journals and databases, and provides instructions on how to find books and articles. It also mentions subject guides and course reserves. A sidebar menu on the right lists various services, with 'Services for Faculty' highlighted in green.

Figure 4. Screenshot of a new lower-level page.

The most significant changes were the relocation of the navigation column from left to right and some new features that were included in OmniUpdate, including the ability to add contact information. We had to do some formatting, such as adding headings and hyperlinks, and some metadata work, such as creating page descriptions and keywords. We also had to pick a photo for the banner of each page. We had planned to have the University photographer take new photos, but because there were no students and hardly any staff on campus, we had to rely on pictures of our spaces he had already taken.

We were tracking the migration on a spreadsheet (see fig. 5). This document contained the new architecture of the website and had links to the Google Docs mentioned previously. The spreadsheet also noted who was responsible for reviewing the content and the status of each page.

Page Name	Existing pages	Current URL	Reviewer	Action	DOC	Ready for migration	Comments
							Mirgation underway
Hours	Hours	ries/about/hours/index.html		Ben project		Ben needs to migrate	
Library Departments	Library Administration ; Collections : Technical Services Department ; Library Technology	es/about/library-admin.html bout/technical-services.html logy/library-technology.html	Admin team	Create	X	Currently being reviewed	
Preservation Department	About Preservation / Links to resources	ns/about/preservation.html	Heather	Review and migrate	X	Currently being created	Will include "CIRCULATION OF REFERENCE MATERIALS" policy
Collections				Create	X		
Trial Databases							
Contact Us	Contact Us	aries/about/contact-us.html		Review and migrate			If we have a "library departmen page, do we need this page?"
Libraries Overview	Libraries Overview	raries/about/overview.html	Admin team	Review and migrate	X	Currently being reviewed	
Branch Libraries	Bartle Library ; Science Library ; UDC Library - Information Commons ; Libraries' Annex	raries/locations/bartle.html aries/locations/science.html raries/locations/annex.html s/locations/udc-library.html	Jill, Nancy, Dave V	Create	X	Currently being reviewed	This page will include a descriopt of Bartle Libraries, UDC, Scienc and Annex. Other links. Need to remove information at the ATRs

Figure 5. Screenshot of the spreadsheet used to track the migration of webpages.

While this mass migration was taking place, Ben focused on creating the pages that required additional coding and customization such as the Ask a Librarian page, the staff directory, and library tutorials. He also worked on the design of the home page. One of the tools Ben used to help with the mock-up was Adobe XD (see fig. 6).

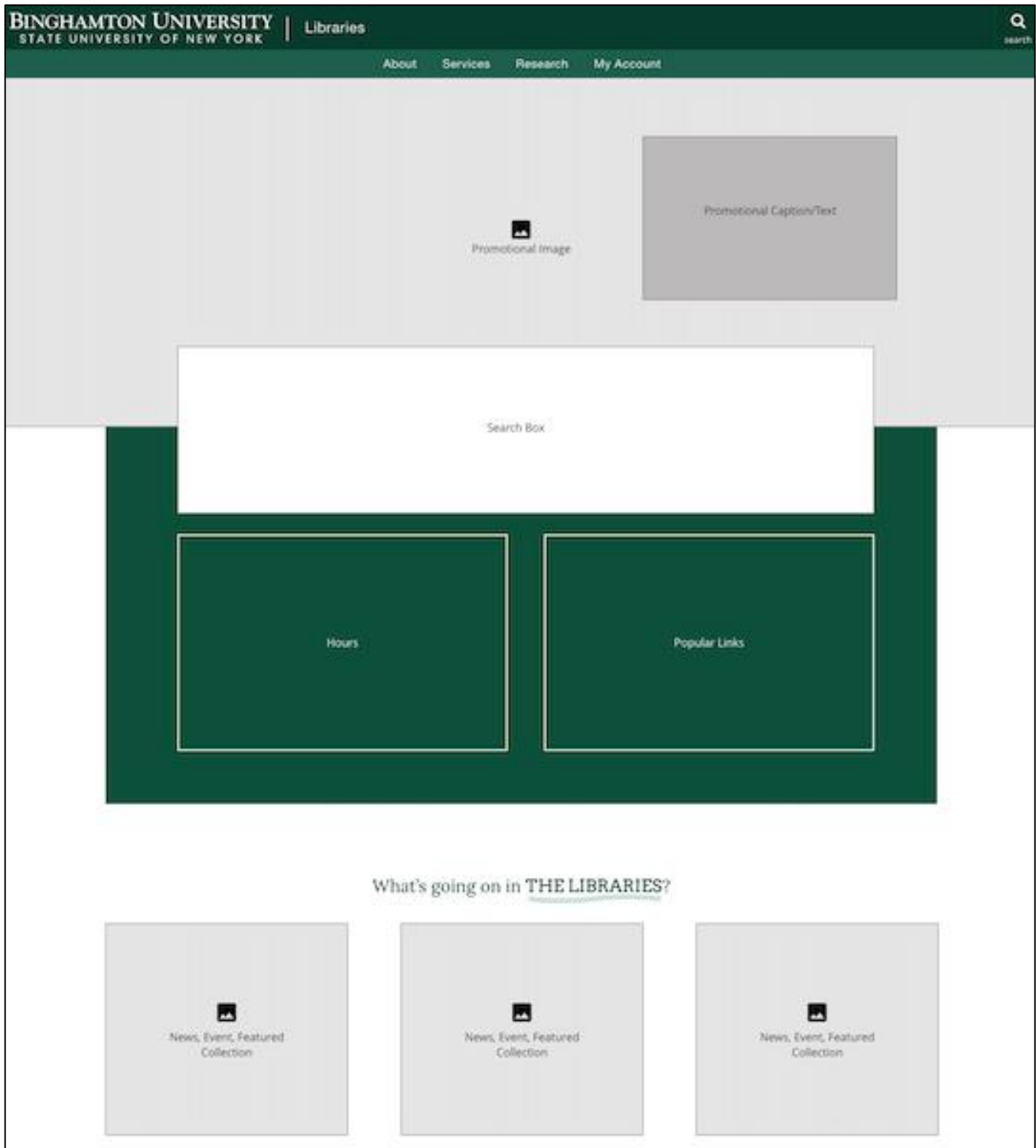


Figure 6. Screenshot of initial design of home page in Adobe XD.

Adobe XD is a design tool in the Adobe suite used for prototyping user interfaces. He created an interactive wireframe for the home page and landing pages. This allowed us to discuss the interface and make changes without a lot of time spent on mock-ups.

August 2020: Final Meetings and Details

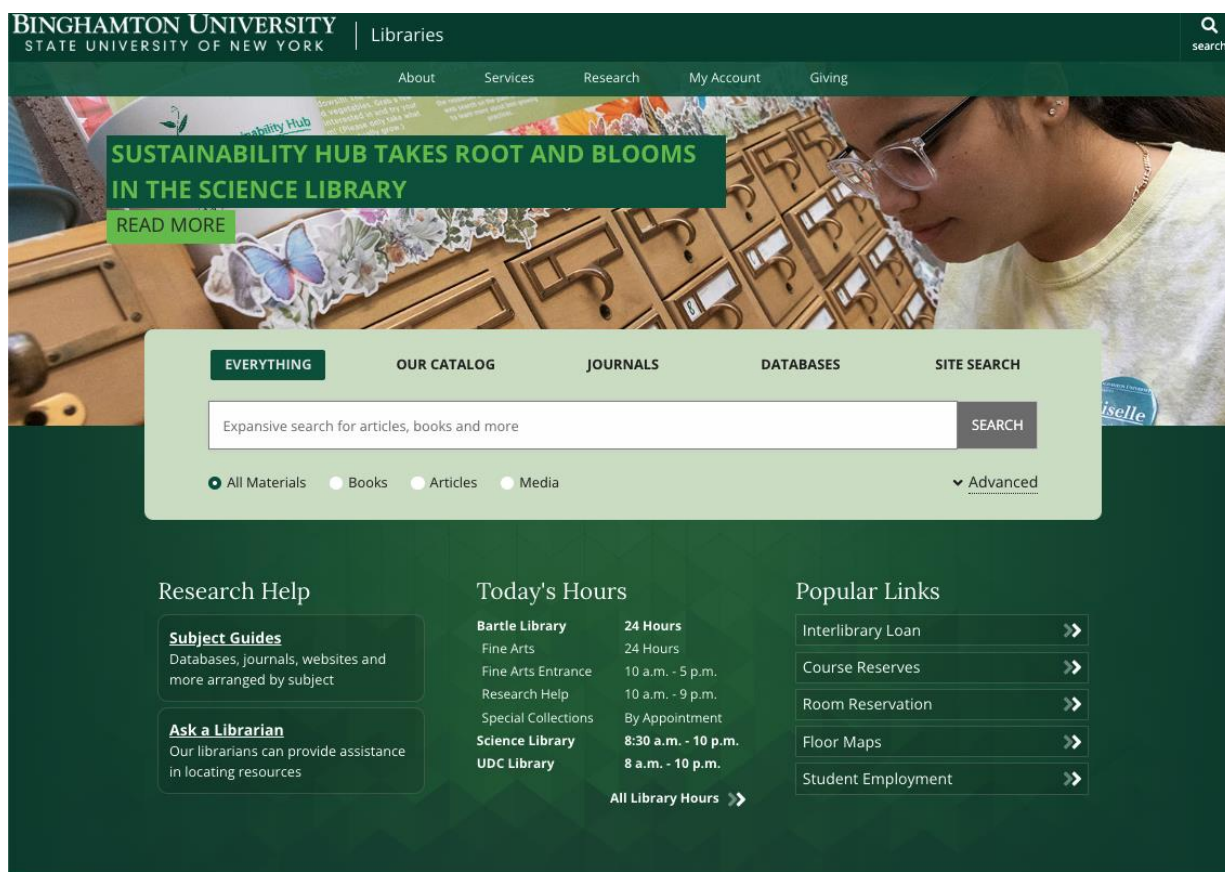
We met with the User Interface Steering Committee on August 5 to get their input on the redesign. On August 7, we met with Communications and Marketing again to go over our design and get final approval for our home page. We also previewed the site to library people at an all-staff meeting later that day.

The final week before site launch was dedicated to the Special Collections pages that had embedded links for finding aids and to working on the Ask a Librarian page. And the last day was spent going through and making sure everything was in order before launch.

August 19, 2020: Successful Launch of the New Website

We launched the redesigned website on August 19 (see fig. 7). Some of its new features include

- A large “hero” photo which can easily be changed depending on what the Libraries want to promote;
- A redesigned search box;
- Popular links featured on the home page;
- A news section which pulls from our blog software and allows for automatic updates; and
- A prominent, visually attractive place on the home page for Special Collections since it was bumped from the top navigation bar.



What's going on in THE LIBRARIES?

Figure 7. Partial screenshot of the new library home page.

CONCLUSION

The process that we had initially envisioned did not work out because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we did meet with our student advisory group, we never got to hold any focus groups with teaching faculty or usability studies with students. But thanks to Zoom and other online tools, we were still able to gather some user feedback. We also had a new website ready before fall 2020.

While there was certainly unanticipated stress in tackling a project like this in the middle of a pandemic, we felt that working remotely in some ways helped us to be more productive. We were better able to focus almost exclusively on this project and were less impacted by the distractions that often occur in the office environment. We also felt that the quick adoption of Zoom made us more agile about scheduling and holding meetings.

Despite some of the challenges that we faced throughout the project, the redesigned website is a success. Since the launch, we have made a few minor changes to the overall architecture of the site. The most significant change was adding a Giving link to the navigation menu at the request of our dean and the Binghamton University Foundation.

Our library website is never static, as we continue to update our home page with news and events and change our hero banner to reflect the priorities of the Libraries. While we have no plans for another major redesign in the near future, we are open to making changes and improvements as needed.

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